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Pakistan: Tahira Mazhar Ali, a campaigner for women's rights who acted as mentor to Benazir Bhutto and was the mother of Tariq Ali

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'She was the original woman leader who demonstrated that the struggle for class and gender equality is a life-long one,' said Afiya Shehribano Zia

When Tahira Mazhar Ali, Pakistan's pre-eminent women's rights activist, was a teenager, she encountered the man who would go on to found the country. In 1941 Muhammad Ali Jinnah went to see her father Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan, Prime Minister of the then undivided Punjab, at his office on the Upper Mall in Lahore. "I know all about you," Jinnah said reproachfully when introduced to her. "You prefer Jawaharlal to me."

It was true. As a teenager Tahira had been expelled by Queen Mary College in Lahore for demanding that Jawaharlal Nehru, leader of the Indian National Congress, be invited to speak. The headmistress, Miss Cox, objected on the ground that he was a man. "But what about Ram Gopal, the dancer, then? Was he a hermaphrodite?"

Tahira secretly maintained a correspondence with Nehru. He would write back, discussing the freedom struggle against the British Raj and offering reading suggestions. Tahira's letters are preserved in the Nehru Museum in Delhi but Nehru's letters were destroyed after reading. Tahira was fearful that her father, a noted opponent of the Congress, might discover them.

Hayat Khan was a crusty feudal landowner from the Punjabi village of Wah who served as Prime Minister of Punjab from 1937 until his death five years later. While a supporter of independence he preferred to seek accommodation with the British, who had heavily decorated him for his loyalty. When Tahira fell in love with Mazhar Ali Khan, he disapproved of the arrangement.

Mazhar was the son of Nawab Muzzafar Khan, Sikandar's first cousin and a member of his Punjab cabinet. On paper their children seemed an ideal match. But Mazhar, although from a more senior branch of the family, was a committed communist. Sikandar laid down a stipulation: Mazhar could only marry his daughter if he joined the Allied Forces in the Second World War.

Fortuitously for the couple, the Soviet Union was invaded shortly after and the Communist Party of India issued a directive that all its middle and upper class members should join the war effort. The couple were married, with Lieutenant Mazhar Ali dressed in his army uniform, before he went off to Italy to fight.

But relations with Tahira's family didn't stabilise. She had broken with tradition, and her husband, a gifted writer and orator, was capable of issuing attacks on his father-in-law. At one public rally Mazhar accused Sikandar of "getting up on his hind legs to plead with the British." Tahira's brother,

who was present, swiftly reported back to his family. They were less than pleased.

The marriage was a commitment both to love and to politics. It meant that Tahira established a distance from her own family, a brave thing to do in the 1940s, especially for an upper-class woman. Tahira and Mazhar's lives were modest at first. "Our home may have been empty of material things," she once told a family friend, "but my life with Mazhar was full in every way that mattered."

Their home became a sanctuary for writers, poets, activists and visiting socialist leaders from all over the world. The Progressive Writers Association was founded in their garage on Lahore's Nicholson Road. Among those present were the leading poets and writers Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi and Sajjad Zaheer. Other regular visitors included the Bhuttos, father and daughter.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was friends with Mazhar and visited him in Lahore to warn him that the military dictatorship of General Ayub Khan was poised to snatch control of the newspaper he edited, The Pakistan Times. The friendship was tested at times; when Bhutto became Prime Minister in 1972 he blocked Tahira's eldest son Tariq Ali, the noted writer and activist, from landing in Lahore. Bhutto saw Tariq as a rival and felt threatened.

Tahira wrote Bhutto a blistering letter, accusing him of betraying the people's cause; its ferocity prompted a lifting of the travel ban. Tahira and Bhutto shared the same birthday, 5 January, and when Bhutto was in jail in Lahore, having been toppled by a military coup, she sent him a box of cigars. It was the perfect gift for a committed communist to send Pakistan's most flamboyant leader.

Tahira vigorously opposed General Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship, for which she was jailed. She was the first person in Pakistan to pair the fight for workers' rights with the fight for women's rights, resisting Zia's assault on the rights of women. She had been among a small group that marked Pakistan's first International Women's Day in 1948, and she became General Secretary of the Democratic Women's Association.

The position helped her travel to conferences to meet like-minded people from around the world. On one occasion, the Turkish dissident poet, Nazim Hikmet, approached her, kissed her hand and cooed that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen." Her husband Mazhar, who was standing nearby, frowned austere.

In her later years, before she suffered a series of debilitating strokes that left her partially paralysed, she served as a loved mentor to many of Pakistan's prominent women. Benazir Bhutto would seek her counsel, and saw Tahira as a surrogate mother and confided in her about politics and personal issues. Tahira frowned on her choice of husband in Asif Ali Zardari, warning that he would be her ruin. Zardari became notorious as "Mr 10 Per Cent" for his reputed avarice.

"She was the original woman leader who demonstrated through her personal example that the struggle for class and gender equality is a life-long one," said Afiya Shehrbano Zia, a leading women's rights activist and writer. Tahira died following a long illness.

OMAR WARAICH

Tahira Mazhar Ali, activist: born 5 January 1924; married 1942 Mazhar Ali Khan (one daughter, two sons); died 23 March 2015.

P.S.

* The Independent (Pakistan). Sunday 29 March 2015.

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